# WILLFUL MOTHERHOOD: HARRIET JACOBS'S REWORKINGS OF SENTIMENTAL POLITICS

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## Introduction

Slave narrative is a literary genre that marks one of the earliest Afro-American contributions to American literature, as it features authentic accounts of slavery told directly by ex-slaves. As the critical assessment of this genre progresses, however, it has come to our understanding that the generic conditions organizing this literary discourse were, ironically enough, not so congenial to its black authors. As a narrative patronized by white abolitionists, the genre was informed by white-oriented discursive rules such as a stereo-typed image of a brutalized, helpless slave, a sentimental style of supplicating tone of rhetoric, and a strict conformity to all the values that the nineteenth century American culture held dear—Christianity, virtue, and domesticity. Frederic Douglass in his slave narrative depicted the reality of slavery through a detached, impersonal, camera-eye. He could, indeed, create a textual *presence* of his self, but he did not dare to perfect this substantially empty image of self by stuffing it with any sort of individuated psychological depths. Douglass's rendition of self, while working out a silent cultural criticism as it implies the placelessness of black subjects in the contemporary American societies, literalizes the inarticulativity of his selfhood within the restrictive conditions of slave narrative. As Frances Smith Foster aptly compares the subjectivity of ex-slave writers with W. E. B. Du Bois's double-consciousness, to write a slave narrative means for ex-slave writers not only self-alienation but also self-

negation (*Witnessing Slavery* 64).

Harriet A. Jacobs, too, composed her slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), under these generic restrictions. In the case of Jacobs, however, the situation was complicated further by her female identity. As is already well documented by critics such as Jean Fagan Yellin, Karen Sanchez-Eppler, and so forth, the nineteenth century feminist-abolitionism imposed on black women writers a peculiar obligation to disclose their sexual vulnerability. Through the fact of slave women's sexual vulnerability which problematized the institution of slavery from a moral point of view, feminist-abolitionists sought a legitimate ground for their intervention in the debate on slavery under the ideology of true womanhood which defined women's moral superiority over men. As feminist-abolitionists made use of an iconography which depicted a sexually vulnerable slave woman supplicating for a help in front of a white female liberator and uttering the clichéd expression; "AM I NOT A WOMAN AND A SISTER ?," this particular figure of slave women was, also, supposed to serve as a sentimental yoke to consolidate the political alliance between feminism and abolitionism. This was, however, only a white-oriented idealism. For as Sanchez-Eppler makes it clear the way in which "the alliance attempted by feminist-abolitionist texts···generally tend[s] toward asymmetry and exploitation" (Sanchez-Eppler 93), sexual vulnerability of slave women declares an unbridgeable difference between black and white women, as it disqualifies black women to participate in the culture of true womanhood and places them once again in a vulnerable position as a deprived subject. Given the fact that to participate in the abolitionist sentimental politics of sisterhood and womanhood means for black women to disable themselves as women, it appears all too natural for Harriet Jacobs to express her dissatisfaction with this identity politics: "Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others" (56).[1]

Critical debates surrounding Jacobs's slave narrative are, in fact, revolved around a problem of how Jacobs, manifesting her misgivings

toward the feminist-abolitionist rendition of slave women, copes with the instrumentality of her sexual self. We all know, by now, that Jacobs's text exhibits mixed feelings, as it embodies the author's psychological vacillation between conformity and resistance toward the requirements of the abolitionist sentimental discourse. With increasing frequency, however, it has been noted that Jacobs's troubled adherence is a creationist pretension through which Jacobs actually criticizes and revises the conventional sentimental politics. Arguing that Jacobs criticizes the exploitative nature of the conventional sentimental politics "not by definitively rejecting them, but by elaborating them from within," Franny Nudelman, for instance, delineates the way in which Jacobs elaborates "the standard for communication between black and white women" (Nudelman 941, 955–56). While abolitionist sentimental politics relies for its efficacy on the disclosure of slave women's experience of sexual exploitation, Jacobs, Nudelman points out, privileges "the exercise of reserve" through which the difference of experience between black and white women can be appreciated and the exploitative relationship between them can also be rectified into mutual understanding (Nudelman 956).[2] Admitting that Jacobs's slave narrative is informed by her effort to reclaim sentimental politics from a black woman's perspective, this essay investigates rhetorical aspects of this narrative which illuminate the radicalism of Jacobs's sentimental politics. I will show in what follows that Jacobs's revision of the abolitionist sentimentalism includes total alteration of its terminology. Jacobs, that is to say, discards the conventional language of sisterhood and womanhood, "AM I NOT A WOMAN AND A SISTER ?," and, instead, appropriates the language of motherhood in a way that finds an egalitarian point of identification for the feminist-abolitionist alliance between black and white women. Through this analysis, it will be clear that Harriet Jacobs in this text is reclaiming abolitionist sentimental politics with vocabularies which were utterly unimaginable for the nineteenth century white feminist-abolitionists.

## Jacobs's Invention of Willful Motherhood

As Jacobs writes: "My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each" (85), Jacobs's slave narrative is, in a sense, a story of a slave woman who, by the power of her invincible will to freedom, extricates herself from "the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery" (54). As Bruce Mills aptly observes that her "'sass' affirms her independence and willfulness" (Mills 259), her willfulness, once verbalized, yields a rhetorical mastery which undermines the authority of her lascivious master, Dr. Flint, driving him to unmanly hysteria. "If I have been harsh with you at times," Dr. Flint admits, "your willfulness drove me to it" (83). And it is, in fact, almost a rhetorical cliché for Jacobs to line every action she takes with this particular mentality, as though proving her status as an autonomous subject. The motivation of her sexual union with Mr. Sands is explained by the following interior monologue: "I was determined that the master, whom I so hated and loathed, who had blighted the prospects of my youth, and made my life a desert, should not, after my long struggle with him, succeed at last in trampling his victim under his feet. I would do anything, every thing, for the sake of defeating him" (53). Her ultimate flight from the plantation of Dr. Flint's son, Mr. Flint, is likewise planned according to her resolution "that out of the darkness of this hour a brighter dawn should rise for them [her children]" (85).

Within the categories of the nineteenth century abolitionist sentimentalism, however, slaves' autonomy, especially when it turns out to be of a defiant, rebellious spirit like Jacobs's, finds no expression. For the contemporary sentimentalism, as Philip Fisher observes, was positively engaged in a serious project to create the "hard fact" of slaves' humanity by exploring slaves' capacity to become a sentimental object who, as a helpless victim, manifested Christian moral sentiments—piety, compassion, endurance, and forgiveness.[3] Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), in fact, provides an ideal example to clarify this point. Stowe checks and balances her excessive, sometimes partial, idealization

of Uncle Tom by introducing into her text a complementary story of self-liberating slaves, George and Eliza Harris. Stowe's treatments of George and Eliza, however, appear to be meaningfully problematical. It is true that Stowe prepares for Eliza a pretext to flee from her kind master, Mr. Shelby, by employing a figure of a desperate and helpless mother in saving her only remaining child from a slave trader. This characterization, together with Stowe's subsequent description of Eliza's frantic, even suicidal, way of escape, where Eliza makes "a desperate leap—impossible to anything but madness and despair" into the icy river and "[w]ith wild cries and desperate energy she leaped to another and still another cake; stumbling—leaping—slipping—springing upward again····but she saw nothing, felt nothing" (Stowe 117–18), however, makes Eliza only an instinctive creature without showing any single sign of personal agency and autonomy in her action. What is more telling is Stowe's treatment of George Harris. Among many of slave characters in this novel, George is, indeed, the only one who shows an independent, defiant spirit comparable to Jacobs's. It is this George Harris that makes an important "declaration of independence" of slave population in this novel: "We don't own your laws; we don't own your country; we stand here as free, under God's sky, as you are; and, by the great God that made us, we'll fight for our liberty till we die" (Stowe 298). Stowe, however, does not have any definitive terms either to support his declaration, or to argue for his subsequent violent attempt to defend himself and his family from slave hunters:

> If it had been only a Hungarian youth, now bravely defending in some mountain fastness the retreat of fugitives escaping from Austria into America this would have been sublime heroism; but as it was a youth of African descent, defending the retreat of fugitives through America into Canada, of course we are too well instructed and patriotic to see any heroism in it; and if any of our readers do, they must do it on their own private responsibility. When despairing Hungarian fugitives make their way, against all the search-warrants and authorities of

> their lawful government, to America, press and political cabinet ring with applause and welcome. When despairing African fugitives do the same thing,—it is—what *is* it? (Stowe 299, emphasis original)

There is, to be sure, a certain room to read this passage ironically. Namely, Stowe is trying to question the justice of education and patriotism which cannot call George's act by the name of "heroism." Yet the facts that she defines George's heroism as a personal, not a collective, identification, and that she is actually unable to give a proper name to George's subjectivity, testify the point that slaves' autonomy constitutes an unspeakable region in a sentimental discourse.

In this respect, the problem for Harriet Jacobs lies in the fact that she cannot articulate her personal autonomy within the conventional sentimental discourse. Her assertion of personal agency in her sexual union with Mr. Sands, in fact, jeopardizes the integrity of her sentimental narrative. "I will not try to screen myself behind the plea of compulsion from a master; for it was not so. Neither can I plead ignorance or thoughtlessness," her usual perspicuity runs, "I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation" (54). Voluntary traffic in sexual self is the fact of Jacobs's desperate "headlong plunge" (55). This fact proves devastating for Jacobs as a woman according to the ideology of true womanhood, but it is even more so for Jacobs as an author. For with this fact, it is impossible for Jacobs to carry on her sentimental communication with readers. From the beginning, experiences her sexual degradation brings to her, such as family ostracism and Mr. Durham's thoughtful advice, "Your strait-forward answers do you credit; but don't answer every body so openly. It might give some heartless people a pretext for treating you with contempt" (160), have already implanted in Jacobs's mind some sort of skepticism about readers' response to her story. "[T]he world might believe that a Slave Woman was too willing to pour out," confides Jacobs in her private letter to her white, Quaker, feminist-abolitionist friend, Amy Post, "that she might gain their sympathy" (242). Rather than giving herself up to her unreliable readers' free

judgment and criticism, Jacobs, therefore, chooses sentimental isolation. She addresses to her reader, "Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader!" (55), but it is only to invalidate this authorial request. For Jacobs ultimately takes away from her readers a right to judge her and cuts off her sentimental communication by concluding, "I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do" (55).

The figure of mother, then, emerges in this text as a descriptive tool to resolve these problems concomitant with the tension between Jacobs's desire for self-expression and the antagonistic norms of abolitionist sentimentalism. By declaring "In a few months I shall be a mother" (56), Jacobs can resume her sentimental communication with her readers: the scandal of her voluntary sexual degradation becomes muffled into the ambiguous status of mother as a sexual being; her questionable status as a woman gets transformed into the most cherished, idolized sentimental object of identification in the nineteenth century American culture, that is, the mother. More importantly, as a status accrued from her "deliberate calculation," Jacobs's figure of mother signifies her autonomy since it interiorizes her willfulness. Confining slave women in the sentimental bond of sisterhood and womanhood where all they were allowed to do was pleading and uttering the words, "AM I NOT A WOMAN AND A SISTER?," the nineteenth century conventional feminist-abolitionist sentimentalism actually omitted the figure of mother from their interracial identity politics, no matter how inviolably it was consecrated by the period's sentimental fictions as Mary P. Ryan expresses its prevalence by "the empire of the mother." In this sense, Jacobs's introduction of a figure of mother into slave narrative is innovative, indeed. She doubly exploits the silence of feminist-abolitionism and the unspeakable of sentimental discourse in creating the figure of willful mother. The result is even terrific because a slave woman's desire for self-expression and the generic requirement of sentimentalism in abolitionist literature cohere in this figure of willful mother. It is, therefore, natural for Harriet Jacobs to show a special commitment to her identity as a mother: "I have placed myself before

you to be judged as a woman whether I deserve your pity or contempt —I have another object in view—it is to come to you as I am a poor Slave Mother" (242).

## Willful Mother's Political Agenda

The figure of willful mother has to be understood as different from the white-oriented sentimental mother in a sense that, as Jacobs claims its racial identity by calling it a "Slave Mother," Jacobs's motherhood derives its peculiar status from her authentic experience of slavery. This figure of "Slave Mother," in fact, implies both critique to, and a revision of, the idea of motherhood as is existed in the nineteenth century sentimental literature. Jacobs's motherhood has, quite often, been identified with Aunt Marthy's. Recognizing the centrality of motherhood in this text, Jean Fegan Yellin, for instance, writes:

> [M]otherhood is central to *Incidents*····[W]omen black or white —Linda Brent, Grandmother, Aunt Nancy, Mrs. Flint—are all defined by the way in which they respond to motherhood···· Brent's role model is her grandmother····Instead of preaching passivity and self-destructive romantic love, Grandmother teaches Linda the doctrine of active, nurturing motherhood. (Yellin 89)

Echoing Yellin's observation, Bruce Mills points out, "It is the grandmother who constantly asserts the importance of Brent's duty as a mother and thus champions the maternal power which gives Brent the strength to endure" (Mills 259). It is, as these critics note, true that Jacobs shares many traits, personal or maternal, with Aunt Marthy, such as a sense of independence, perseverance, and maternal nurturance toward her children. It is, however, of an equal importance to recognize that their ideas of motherhood are not identical. As Jacobs's motherhood motivates her to reject Aunt Marthy's maternal counsel: "Stand by your own children, and suffer with them till death" (91), Jacobs's idea of motherhood is on conflicting terms with Aunt Marthy's. In this paradigmatic difference between the two modes of motherhood, a certain revi-

sionary aspect of Jacobs's motherhood in relation to the nineteenth century idea of sentimental motherhood can be observed.

Aunt Marthy replicates the ideals of motherhood and domesticity upheld by the nineteenth century sentimental fictions, as Krista Walter aptly observes: "Aunt Marthy is so thoroughly and genuinely steeped in the traditional values of the white ruling class" (Walter 202). Aunt Marthy is presented in this narrative as a paragon of motherhood in the southern slave-holding community, where the majority of white women are, totally or partially, deprived of the ground to exercise their maternal influence by the institution of slavery. Such ideals of motherhood as self-abnegation, moral purity, nurturance, and even maternal authority, are, therefore, all for Aunt Marthy to protect from the corruption of slavery. This fact that Aunt Marthy is playing a role of a surrogate ideal mother for the white community, ironically enough, constitutes a main limitation of her subjectivity as a member of the oppressed race. For Aunt Marhty is swallowed up by the logic of slavery so thoroughly that there are instances in which her motherhood appears to be even instrumental for the preservation of the institution. Though she understands slaves' desire for freedom, Aunt Marthy never fails to pose a strong objection against her children's activism to open a way to freedom by their own hands. In effect, her maternal influence seems, sometimes, even pernicious to the actualization of slaves' desire for freedom. When her son, Benjamin, fails his first attempt to flee to the North, he gets captured, sent back to the South, and then imprisoned only to live a life worse than death for more than six months. And the cause of this misery is that, "When he was captured," Benjamin tells his mother, "he broke away, and was about casting himself into the river, when thoughts of *her* came over him, and he desisted" (22, emphasis original). Aunt Marthy's maternal influence ironically enslaves him, so that Benjamin's story of struggle toward freedom must be woven and completed, after he is severed from his mother's grasp by the law of slavery.

The scenario of Jacobs's escape from Dr. Flint parallels Benjamin's experience in many respects. It is undeniable that Jacobs could not have

succeeded her escape, but for Aunt Marthy's aids. It is, in fact, Aunt Marthy that provides Jacobs with places for her concealment. Jacobs's hiding places, both Betty's storage under the kitchen floor and Aunt Marthy's garret, materialize Aunt Marthy's maternal influence as they take mobility away from Jacobs: "I had tried various applications to bring warmth and feeling into my limbs, but without avail. They were so numb and stiff that it was painful effort to move" (132). Elizabeth C. Becker calls this paralyzing state of Jacobs's "the ultimate stay-at-home mother" (Becker 418). To this observation, however, I would add that this figure is nothing but an ironical realization of Aunt Marthy's ideal of motherhood: "Stand by your own children, and suffer with them till death," since, from this state of being, freedom is ever unobtainable.

All this is not to say that Aunt Marthy invalidates slaves' efforts toward freedom. We know that Aunt Marthy works hard to purchase her children and never gives up doing it. But still we must recognize the fact that Aunt Marthy, by doing this, instrumentalizes herself for the economy of slave trade, which is, for Jacobs, an object of abhorrence: "I despise the miscreant who demanded payment for what never rightfully belonged to him or his" (200). To make this irony still more compelling, this monetary means to obtain freedom actually jeopardizes Aunt Marthy's home and house, the indispensable maternal sphere in the sentimental fiction: "She [Aunt Marthy] insisted upon my writing to Dr. Flint, as soon as I arrived in the Free States, and asking him to sell me to her. She said she would sacrifice her house, and all she had in the world, for the sake of having me safe with my children in any part of the world" (151). Aunt Marthy's maternal sentiment can not only provide so many great comforts and consolations within a slave society, as Jacobs remembers: "We longed for a home like hers. There we always found sweet balsam for our troubles. She was so loving, so sympathizing···· She spoke so hopefully, that unconsciously the clouds gave place to sunshine" (17), but also exert an influence upon her children to realize the importance of independence and freedom. With this, however, she can never transcend the status quo of a slave-holding society. As a

surrogate mother of sentimental tradition, Aunt Marthy shares with these white mothers, Mrs. Shelby, Mrs. Bird, and Rachel Holiday in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a limitation that they can invisibly influence others to act against slavery, but cannot get outside of home to act by themselves.

Jacobs's willful motherhood is, then, formulated in answer to the characteristic lack of activism in the white-oriented sentimental motherhood that supports Philip Fisher's analysis:

> That feeling and empathy are deepest where the capacity to act has been suspended···defines the limit of sentimental representation····By limiting the goal of art to the revision of images rather than to the incitement to action, sentimentality assumes a healthy and modest account of the limited and interior consequences of art. (Fisher 122)

A willful mother, that is to say, strives to break through this sentimental confinement and aims to make a difference in the status quo of slaveholding society, by action. The chapter, "Prejudice against Color," provides us with an example of willful mother's anti-slavery activism. In this chapter that tells us about racial discrimination in the North, we see Jacobs develop from one state in which she shrinks at mistreatments and insults she meets wherever she goes, to the other from which she can speak: "My answer was that the colored servants ought to be dissatisfied with *themselves*, for not having too much self-respect to submit to such treatment····I was resolved to stand up for my rights····Let every colored man and woman do this, and eventually we shall cease to be trampled under foot by our oppressors" (177, emphasis original). Provided activism constitutes the essential core of Jacobs's idea of willful motherhood, the fact that Jacobs obtains her freedom at the expense of Mrs. Bruce creates a central irony of willful mother's anti-slavery politics, as Jacobs cannot suppress her frustration: "[T]o pay money to those who had so grievously oppressed me seemed like taking from my suffering the glory of triumph" (199). Though her story can end with her freedom, Jacobs's activism as a willful mother cannot end

with her story. "The dream of my life is not yet realized," Jacobs predicts her subsequent struggle as a willful mother, "I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble. I wish it for my children's sake far more than for my own" (201). To achieve this end, Jacobs has to break through another sort of bondage: "But God so orders circumstances as to keep me with my friend Mrs. Bruce. Love, duty, gratitude, also bind me to her side" (201). Between her desire for an independent household and her sentimental self-imprisonment, struggles of a willful mother thus continue into the world beyond the text.

As I demonstrated earlier, Jacobs's idea of willful motherhood positions itself on conflicting terms with Aunt Marthy's traditional motherhood in the sense that the latter threatens the activism of the former. The psychology of willful motherhood is different from that of sentimental motherhood in this crucial point that Jacobs justifies leaving her family in order to save them, whereas Aunt Marthy literalizes the nineteenth century idealism of home, a hearth in the harsh world. This difference is, in fact, material, but it is by no means antithetical. For the activism of willful mother is meant not to destroy Aunt Marthy's domestic ideal, but to secure it in a right place. As Jacobs actually saves Aunt Marthy's home by carrying out her escape independently, Jacobs's motherhood is not destructive at all, but rather conductive, to the preservation of Aunt Marthy's domestic sphere. The activism of willful motherhood, in other words, aims at moralistic reform of the hypocrisy of domestic ideal, which, taking it for granted that the world is harsh and corruptible, not only instrumentalizes women to preserve the corruption of the status quo by having them provide a false comfort at home, but also justifies, even idolizes, this victimization of women under the name of mother's empire.

Though Jacobs, unlikely for a mother, leaves her children, her maternal experiences, in fact, parallel Aunt Marthy's in many respects. Just as Aunt Marthy provided little, helpless Jacobs with many solaces and comforts as Jacobs writes: "I was indebted to *her* all my comforts,

material or temporal. It was *her* labor that supplied my scanty wardrobe" (11, emphasis original), Jacobs, in her own turn, takes care of her little, helpless, slighted daughter, Ellen, and of her son, Benny, with the same maternal nurturance. As a nurse for a child of the Bruce family, moreover, Jacobs reproduces cross-racial maternal affection of her grandmother who extends and never loses her maternal affection even toward her persecutors, the Flints, by saying that "Your wife was my foster-child, Dr. Flint, the foster-sister of my poor Nancy, and you little know me if you think I can feel anything but good will for her children" (145). The activism of willful motherhood is, therefore, an effort to create an ideal setting for Aunt Marthy's motherhood to flourish free from the contamination of the world outside.

## Conclusion: Friendship across the Color-Line

Harriet Jacobs, thus, reorganizes terms of abolitionist sentimental discourse by creating a figure of willful mother. Not only does this maternal figure make it possible for Jacobs to articulate slave subjectivity within the categories of sentimental discourse, the very discourse which suppressed the fact of slaves' personal autonomy. It also brings about a harmonious resolution of the imbalance inherent in the conventional feminist-abolitionist alliance between black and white, by enabling Jacobs to break through the rhetorical confinement of "AM I NOT A WOMAN AND A SISTER ?" and to claim a membership in the mother's empire. We concluded the last discussion by arguing that willful motherhood was an innovation of white-oriented idea of mother in the nineteenth-century sentimental literature. Magnifying the gravity of slavery issue by problematizing it from the ideological context of domesticity, a willful mother, on the one hand, subscribes herself to the anti-slavery project designed for "free white American mothers" to "fortify the home, to rescue domesticity from shiftlessness and slavery" (Brown 16). A willful mother, on the other hand, does not take part in what Gillian Brown terms as the "politics of the kitchen" (Brown 16), insofar

as it is founded on Stowe's sentimental politics of "*feel*[ing] *right*": "There is one thing that every individual can do,—they can see to it that *they feel right.* An atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being; and the man or woman who *feels* strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race" (Stowe 624, emphasis original). Now that a number of critics, including Gillian Brown, already convinced us that Stowe elaborated her politics of feeling as an active weapon to abolish slavery,[4] we must not take the ethereality of emotional "atmosphere" and "influence" being "a constant benefactor to the human race" at face value. But still, Jacobs, at least, does not think Stowe's sentimental politics of "*feel*[ing] *right*" effective enough to mobilize the corrupted status quo. To trust in its efficacy, Jacobs knows too well, by her own experiences, how the language of sympathy can be misappropriated by slaveholders, as she substantiates it in a chapter, "Aunt Nancy," as well as by inserting elsewhere in her text Dr. Flint's disguised letter which reads: "Could you have seen us round her [Aunt Nancy] death bed, with her mother, all mingling our tears in one common stream, you would have thought the same heartfelt tie existed between a master and his servant, as between a mother and her child" (172). With this private knowledge, in fact, she personally refuses to make an object of sympathy out of herself: "I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself···· Neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own sufferings" (1); "Reader, it is not to awaken sympathy for myself that I am telling you truthfully what I suffered in slavery. I do it to kindle a flame of compassion in your heart–for my sisters who are still in bondage, suffering as I once suffered" (29). Admitting sentiments such as "sympathy" and "compassion" as a precondition for abolitionism, Jacobs, though, does not give them her total credit, because Jacobs's slave perspective sees the gap between the ideality of Stowe's sentimental politics and the reality of slavery so clearly that in creating the figure of willful mother, Jacobs replaces the suspicious stasis of feeling with the visibility of political action. Willful motherhood thus transcends the limitation of traditional sentimental

motherhood by introducing the idea of activism as a sure evidence of "*feel*[ing] *right*."

It is often pointed out by critics that there is in this narrative a way in which Jacobs envisions a certain sort of egalitarian cross-racial community. Jon Hauss, among other critics, observes that Jacobs's extensive, ritualistic story-telling beyond racial boundaries serves as a "cultural model for an expanding struggle to produce tentative understanding, and political alliance, across the social and cultural schisms of America" (Hauss 163). The idea of activism in willful motherhood, also, provides Jacobs's feminist-abolitionist sentimental politics with a ground through which this egalitarian cross-racial community of women can be envisioned. There are, in this narrative, many white women who establish with Jacobs as well as many others of this oppressed race a bond of willful motherhood. Throughout her narrative, Jacobs honors these white willful mothers by intertwining the stories of their bravery with her own. Jacobs does this, not because they have mind to sympathize slaves' sufferings. They gain Jacobs's honor because they have determination to exteriorize their sympathies in their actions. The activism in willful motherhood, that is to say, serves as an infallible yoke to reinforce the ideological tie between black and white women, by making the experience of slavery a shared experience. The idea of sharing experience is, in fact, crucial in Jacobs's sentimental politics. While she reveals the falsehood of what are told or written in these chapters, "What Slaves Are Taught to Think of the North," "The Church and Slavery," and "Aunt Nancy," and speaks about the inability of a pen to dig into the reality of slavery, Jacobs insistently urges her readers to get a firsthand experience of slavery throughout the narrative: "If you want to be fully convinced of the abominations of slavery, go on a southern plantation, and call yourself a negro trader. Then there will be no concealment; and you will see and hear things that will seem to you impossible among human beings with immortal souls" (52); "I want to add my testimony to that of abler pen to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is. Only by experience can any one realize

how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations" (1–2). Informed by the principle of shared experience of which Jacobs writes: "There are no bonds so strong as those which are formed by suffering together" (170), the bond of willful mothers presents the most powerful model of the utopian cross-racial community of "interdependence without domination, and encircling unity located beyond exploitation" (Hauss 146).

Jacobs, significantly, designates the feature of this bond of willful mothers as friendship. "Friend!" Jacobs writes, "it is a common word, often lightly used. Like other good and beautiful things, it may be tarnished by careless handling; but when I speak of Mrs. Bruce as my friend, the word is sacred" (201). Not only to this second Mrs. Bruce, Jacobs also gives this sacred word of "Friend" to those who share the perils of her passage toward freedom, such as Aunt Marthy's white friend who provides Jacobs with a place to hide and late Mrs. Bruce who contrives her "hairbreadth escape" (178). This term, friendship, is significant because in the name of "Friend," the exploitative bond between black and white women as sisters and women is rectified into mutuality and equality.

It is in 1858 that Harriet Jacobs completed the manuscripts of her slave narrative. This is the same year, when one freed slave woman fell victim to the abolitionist sentimental discourse of sisterhood and womanhood. It was Sojourner Truth. Seven years ago, at a Woman's Rights Convention at Akron, Ohio, she was obliged to bare her muscular arm, the emblem of brutalized femininity, in order to promote black women's cause in a white-dominant women's rights movement, by asserting: "Look at me! Look at my arm····I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ar'n't I a woman?" (Truth 134). But this time, in the year of 1858, Sojourner Truth was forced to bare her breasts to confirm her female identity in front of pro-slavery audiences. In this tumultuous as well as problematic year in the history of feminist-abolitionism, Harriet Jacobs was already ready, intellectually, not to speak self-questioningly "ar'n't I a woman?," but to *question* her audiences by saying, "ARE YOU NOT A

MOTHER AND A FRIEND?" to recruit American willful mothers.

## Notes

I would like to thank Stacy Hubbard for her insightful comments and suggestions to an earlier version of this essay.

1 For the general discussion of slave narrative, I am indebted to Foster's *Witnessing Slavery*. For the understanding of the feminist-abolitionist rhetorical rendition of slave women, see Sanchez-Eppler, Mills, and, especially, Yellin's provocative work, *Women & Sisters*, which also deals with the feminist-abolitionist iconography extensively.

2 For the discussions on Jacobs's challenge to the feminist-abolitionist sentimental politics, see also Ernest, Foster (1993), Walter, and Yellin.

3 See Fisher, Chapter 2 "Making a Thing into a Man: The Sentimental Novel and Slavery," 87–127.

4 For this point, see also Tompkins, Chapter 5 "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History," 122–146.

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